Today is Friday, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010. My name is James Crabtree. And I'll be interviewing Ms. Paula Wright. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Ms. Wright is at her home in Bryan, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Ma'am, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It means a lot to our program. I guess the best question is always to start with maybe to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the service.

**Paula Wright:** OK, I born in Wooluck, and we kind of moved around for about eight years while my dad was a football coach, and as you know, football coaches are never around. So anyway, the thing I remember most in everything is on my fourth birthday, we moved onto a farm in Texas, and we spent four years there, and then when I was eight years old, we moved into Lubbock where my day taught, coached and taught math. And so that's what I considered home. I grew up there until like I said I was eight, and then I was nineteen when I graduated from high school, and I went straight into the military, 30 days after I graduated, I went straight in the military, which I had planned on doing all along. This is during the Vietnam era, the Vietnam conflict and everything. Well my dad and the other members of my family had been in World War II and so I was raised in, you know, not a military manner, but well I guess you'd say we supported our country.

When you signed up to go in in 1969, were your parents and your friends supportive or was that seen as something that was different for a lady or a female to do?

**Paula Wright:** Well, my dad didn't want me to do it, but it was kind of funny because I had asked for what I did, I went into the Army to fly helicopters. Of course they knew about Vietnam and everything was word about that and everything, and my dad, it was kind of funny because my dad, I didn't find out until after I had served in Vietnam, but my dad really thought we shouldn't be over there. Of course like I say and everything, you know, all were stupid. I wish I didn't have to go but I did because of the experiences that I had. They just, you know, it's a very, you know, of course forming the views and everything and just starting out, you know, but they said well, they supported me.

So when you signed up, were you already signed up to go then when you graduated you knew you'd be going off to boot camp a few days later?

Paula Wright: No, I graduated and like a few days later, I talked to the recruiter, and I had talked them before whenever I was a junior in high school, and to see about the flight program. I had really growing up, I had wanted to go to the Air Force Academy, and of course at that time and everything, they, you know, women didn't go to Academy, and so, you know. And I had one brother-in-law that was in the Air Force. My older sister was married to an Air Force guy. My middle sister was married to a Navy guy, and they were both of them were engine mechanics, one like I said for the Air Force and one for the Navy. Then I went in, and we all three of us were aviation, and so, and of course my sisters they kind of talked about supporting their branch and everything, but you know, I knew I wanted to fly, and I started taking flight lessons when I was 16 years old.

At that time was flying an option for women in the Army?

**Paula Wright:** I was one of the first. Whenever I got in, they had just started the program. So of course, I mean I'd say they were looking for guys and everything because helicopter pilots, their life expectancy wasn't long. It's kind of like being a point man for an infantry squad. But I did go in and I qualified and everything, so I was in basic in El Paso.

OK, so you went to Fort Bliss?

Paula Wright: Yes.

What was that like?

**Paula Wright:** Oh, hot! I went in on June 30<sup>th</sup> and of course got there at Fort Worth on July 1<sup>st</sup>, and then we spent like you'd spend two or three days in reception company processing in, and I stayed like a week because we got in because of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July holidays and such, we had a three-day weekend. So that delayed our processing and everything. So like I said, about a week, and then we went in. Of course it's hot and dry, it's desert country, and our training range was about 20-25 miles north of town, and on white sands that were regular range. Of course the first part and everything, the biggest part that I had and everything and all, well I was a roly-poly all my life, and when I got in, when I was a senior, I lost about 100 pounds, and so well, I was working. It's kind of funny because I took a different path. I didn't take home economics and everything. My dad raised us that we can do anything that we wanted to. My other two sisters, they went into the path of being teachers and everything, and me, I went into a different path. Of course back in the 50s and everything before the, I'd say I was really, I wasn't the 50s generation and I wasn't the 70s, I was in the middle. But I remember the women's lib and burning the bra and all that stuff and everything and the ERA.

How many women were in your platoon there in basic training?

**Paula Wright:** We had like in my platoon? There were just like five of us. We were just a squad and everything, and it was I got in on the co-ed, it was a co-ed deal, and we had the top floor all to ourselves. I had male drill instructors and everything and the only difference was from what I understand with the guys and everything, they'd kind of sneak in on the guys and catch 'em at what they were doing, and for us they had to announce that they were coming up. Of course we didn't, we always had robes or something. We were always dressed.

With the males that were there in training, were most of them, were a lot of them draftees?

**Paula Wright:** Yes. It was kind of funny and everything, my unit we had, there was like 12 of us, but went in together, and all from Lubbock. It was really funny because I was with, my name got, or the Army announced that I went in because I was the last person from the west Texas recruiting area that got an RA number some of them because they, I mean on the 30<sup>th</sup> and on the 1<sup>st</sup> they went to using a social security number. So I had to remember that RA number for one day. I mean everything in the reception company had like they give you a stencil and it's got your name and then your RA number. I still remember it today. RA1577631. And I talked to other guys, people that were in, and they remembered their RA number too, so I guess that's something that they drill into you. But anyway, we went there and then we got into El Paso, and we had a bunch of people from San Antonio, and then let's see, so I was the only woman from Lubbock, but we got some down there. And then when we got to our basic company, half of the company was National Guard from the New York National Guard and they were doing their

summer, and a lot of them, and well some of the ones from San Antonio, in fact there was a couple of guys that had graduated from UT, and they said they had been in the Reserve unit there for two or three years, so they had already been to summer camp, and so they were telling us look, this is just an eight-week deal, and once we get out of basic, it's going to be an 8 to 5 job. You get up in the morning and you go to work and then at 5 o'clock you go home or whatever time your work shift is. So that really helped because they really harass you and they turn you down in basic and then they build you up to be a team member.

Did you have an MOS assigned to you at that point when you were in training?

**Paula Wright:** I was going in as a helicopter mechanic, and in fact I did that and after that I was accepted into the SWAT program and I went into the SWAT program.

OK, so you graduate, how long was your basic training?

**Paula Wright:** Basic training was I went in June 30<sup>th</sup> and I graduated September 2<sup>nd</sup>.

And when you graduated from Fort Bliss, where did you go to next?

**Paula Wright:** I went to Fort Rucker, Alabama.

OK, and that's where you were doing your school training, your MOS training?

Paula Wright: Mm-hmm.

And tell us a little bit about that.

**Paula Wright:** That was very nice and everything. I had my own room. It was only me, and so I had, it was really unusual, I mean they just told us and told all the other guys and everything, you leave her alone, and they said you're not, you get caught having any fun and everything, you're in trouble. Of course at that time I didn't care about that.

Did you enjoy learning how to be a mechanic?

**Paula Wright:** Yes I did. I found it very challenging and everything, and the other guys and the sergeants and everything, I was the first woman that they had worked with, had trained, and so they came up and the school said you got to watch your language around them and everything like that, and language didn't bother me, you understand what I mean. Of course I didn't, you kind of pick up the language every once in a while, \_\_\_\_.

*Sure, what was the most challenging part of the training to become a mechanic?* 

**Paula Wright:** I'm trying to think. Really, the challenging part to me was in the power plant part and working with the power plant and the transmission, and working with the rubber system and everything, and really the transmission and everything had so many gears and I don't know why, I was trying to remember, to me, I was taught well, I want to know, remember all the different gears, how it went in, it went in from here, went there, and the sergeant just finally told me, he says you know what, all you have to remember is that rubber \_\_\_\_ quits turning, if the transmission quits turning, the helicopter takes on the characteristic of a homesick brick outhouse, it falls very fast. But that was the biggest part. That was personally challenging.

Career-wise, trying to prove that a woman could do it, because a lot of the older soldiers, instructors and everything like this were, well a woman is not supposed to be here. They're supposed to be home, pregnant, having babies and taking care of their husband. And so that wa the biggest thing because they kept coming up and telling me, they said if you mess up, we're going to flunk you out, and we're going to send you, I knew they couldn't send me to the infantry because at the time, even at the time, now women didn't serve in the infantry.

Yeah, they still don't.

**Paula Wright:** And so I know I couldn't do that, but yet they'd tell me they would find the worst career to have and put me in it. And well, I proved them wrong because I was the comrade graduate had a tenth of a point higher average than I did.

Wow, so how long was your training there?

**Paula Wright:** The training was three months.

Yeah, so that's pretty long.

**Paula Wright:** Yes, it is. And so anyway, of course like I said I went through the training and when I got through at Fort Rucker, the week that I spent there, I guess it was about 11 weeks because I spent a week in the reception station, and it was called 2<sup>nd</sup> ESE Company, that's where everybody goes in and where they decide what class you're gonna go to and everything like that. Of course whenever I got there in Fort Rucker, they already, you know how the Army is, they know what's coming down the pipeline and they schedule everything and they know who is going to what. So when I was there, they gave us a chance to take the flight test and so I took the flight test and I was accepted into the flight program. But I went ahead and completed and sent me then, I was going to be, let's see, what was it – the men's class was going to start in January of '70, and so that's when I went. So I got out December 16<sup>th</sup>. Or let's see, I think I got out, I went from September 16<sup>th</sup> to December 16<sup>th</sup>, and so I had a 30-day leave which I did not, you know, in between basic and AIT, it depends on I don't know how they do that, I guess all the guys that were going into infantry training, they got a two-week leave between basic and AIT because as soon as they graduated from the infantry school they were sent immediately to Vietnam. So they got to go home. And me, I did try for Clark OCS and basic training and so they held me over about eight to ten days after basic training to see if I was gonna be up, and the only reason I didn't go, they had 20 opens and I was the 21<sup>st</sup> name.

Would they have sent you to college at that point? How did OCS work at that time?

**Paula Wright:** At that time, they would send you to, OK, you do have the All TC program which they do the college where you were at in OCS, it's a 90-day program which is whatever branch you are in, the main branches and everything is like entry artillery and armor, and they said when you apply, you had to apply for one of the basic branches and then one of the other branches and so what you do is if you got accepted to OCS, you went to like if you were accepted into armor, you'd go to Fort Knox where you'd learn how to be a tanker. If you were in the infantry and everything, then you go to Fort Benning, Georgia, and you'd learn how to be an infantry platoon leader.

But at that time it wasn't a requirement that you'd have to go to college as well.

**Paula Wright:** No. Now if you got commissioned, you was USAR, U.S. Army Reserve. If you want to be, I don't know how it split, an officer that had from West Point, they were USA, U.S. Army, and everybody else was reserve officers. If you wanted to be, come from a reserve officer to a full time officer, which the difference is academy graduate is guaranteed 20 years unless something, he resigns or something happens, and a reserve officer, they serve at the convenience of the president. And so as soon as the word rubber or something like that, they can let you go. But you do like I had to serve, sign up for three years, so what I did is I signed in for three years, and when I went into, part of my three years was my flight training, and then the day before I got my wings and everything, I re-enlisted where I had to serve as three years as an Army aviator.

OK, and where did you go from after you finished there at Fort Rucker?

**Paula Wright:** OK, I went to Fort Walters, Texas, for primary training which we use little helicopters. I can't remember. They were \_\_\_23s. And the ones you saw on MASH all the time bringing the patients in. And we also had Hiller aircraft which was just a two-person and they used it for aerial light, enginery and everything like that. In fact, whenever I got out of primary flight training, they did away with them because they had gone to the jet ranger for observation and the \_\_\_.

At some point did you get sent to Vietnam?

**Paula Wright:** Yes I did. I did go over and I got over there in August of '71. I was assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> and I was the copilot of General Hamlet's aircraft.

Tell us what that was like the first time you got to Vietnam what your thoughts were and your impressions.

**Paula Wright:** I got there about midnight and they turned of course the engines off, and as soon as the engines quit, the air conditioning quit, and they opened up the front door, and I mean the heat, the humidity just wafted through the air. I could smell crivvies.

Where was it that you landed in Vietnam?

**Paula Wright:** I landed at Ben White air field, which was about 15 miles north of Saigon. Of course they come in, when you unload the aircraft and everything goes high rank, goes down rank, and so they took us off and everything, and they didn't even, even though I was a woman, they didn't care. I had to go get my duffle bag. I wasn't a woman, I was a soldier. Of course the other officers, oh, let me get that for you, and I said no, I can do it myself. And because I wasn't, I was hard core, I guess you could put it that way. I was hard core because I was gonna prove to myself and to everybody else that I could do it.

After you arrived in Vietnam, how long was it before you were on missions?

**Paula Wright:** Let's see, it was about 10 days because I spent two or three days at the replacement company and then they took me on the C130 and flew us up to Division headquarters, and I got there and I spent a couple of days processing in and I did talk to the general and they said you're gonna be tied MO. And so talked to him and he kind of got a little bit to know me and he told me, he said just because you're a woman, I'm not gonna treat you special, which I didn't want to be treated special. And he says you're an officer, I will treat you like an officer, and of course gave me a little bit of talk. There's not gonna be, if you want to

have a , do it with an officer. Don't mess with the enlisted because that's against – of course I knew that because I got that in training. What was your rank at that time? **Paula Wright:** I was a CW1. Oh OK, I thought you said you got out as a sergeant E5. Paula Wright: Yeah I did, but what it was is after I came back from Vietnam, they kept back on the pilots and so I went back as an E5. OK, but you were a chief warrant officer 1 when you were there in Vietnam, OK, that makes sense. Paula Wright: So then I had to go from Kumbad where Division headquarters was and go up to Camp Evans where the replacement training company was. They taught us how to take an M60 down. I already knew how to do that, I did that in basic, but it was like how to recognize booby traps and I actually had to go through like a little, we did it on base, we went to a patrol like we were out \_\_\_\_ and taught us how to walk, because you have to pick your feet up. You don't shuffle your feet because you can get in trouble with a booby trap that way. To go back real quick, you finished your training as an aircraft mechanic, and then at some point did you go to a warrant officer course or a class? **Paula Wright:** Yes, that was in January of 1970, and that was almost a year. Then I spent like three months in Fort Walters, Texas, which was middle \_\_\_\_, and base has been closed down for years now. So that's where you picked up your warrant officer rank and then at some point you were promoted – **Paula Wright:** Well, actually it was two different \_\_\_\_. I went \_\_\_\_ primary and then for my, they had three different flight schools. They had one at Port Houston for junior, one at Fort Rucker, and the one at Robin Warren in Georgia, and I went back to, and depending on what you went into, what aircraft you were going to be a pilot at. And so I went back to Fort Rucker and that's where I got my 200 hours in this \_\_ pilot. And it was really kind of unusual there, because you go back there and you see all these old sergeants that taught you and they remember you and you remember them, and they called you sir. Of course, all the cadets and everything even from the West Point, whenever a cadet from West Point goes during the summer for their active duty, even though they're not officers there, they still have to call them sir. I mean that was just kind of, it was funny, to me it was. Describe for us what it was like the first time you flew in Vietnam.

**Paula Wright:** The first time we flew we had gone, oh I can't remember where, we went so many places, but anyway we took the general and he was going out to the different fire bases.

And this was a Huey?

**Paula Wright:** Yes, and we had, of course it was armed, and so, and just us, we went out and we didn't have any gunship escort. They'd introduced me where gunships and everything, you need to be out supporting the troops \_\_\_\_.

Do you remember having any concerns or trepidations about the first time you flew or was it pretty much like training?

Paula Wright: You mean like getting shot at? Yeah, I wondered how I would react when I got shot at, and I think everybody does because you don't know are you going to freeze up, are you going to do what you're trained, what they teach you to do? Of course they said the difference between the Army and the Marines, the Army tries to stay , the Marines are fathers, and of course the Marines won't tell you that, but that's what they say about the Army. But anyway, vou just don't, vou don't know how vou are going to react. We actually went to a where a company had inserted there in the Ashaw Valley, and we didn't get any fine or anything like this, but I mean just when we got set and everything, I heard set and everything like this, and I was saying something was wrong with the general. I asked him what's that? And they said oh, we got hit. I looked at all the controls and the gauges, well everything's OK, all right, it's back in the back, so I'm OK. And so just continue doing your mission. The times I got scared when we was on the ground and we got rocketed because you can't tell where it's coming from and you don't know where it's going. That's when I got scared. In fact there was one time we were watching a film and out in front of the dining hall, and we got a rocket attack, and the CA was right behind me, and so the projector was behind me, and the first sergeant had a couple of dogs. They had a couple of Doberman's and they had dug out underneath the projector booth. That's where they usually laid so it was a little bit deeper, and so of course I hit the ground and I started crawling for that, and I remember putting my foot against something pushing and I thought it was one of the benches. I came to find out later that I put my foot in my CO's face and pushed against his face, and he came up and he didn't jump me or anything like this. He realized we were into elbow time, and it doesn't matter what rank you are or who's first. He had a big laugh about it.

How long did you ultimately end up spending in Vietnam?

**Paula Wright:** I spent a total of just about 11 months. I can tell you, it's 10 months, 29 days.

Did you fly for the general that entire time?

**Paula Wright:** No, I flew for the general from September of '71 to December of '71, and then the unit was sent down, sent back home. I did not have enough time in country to qualify to be sent back to Fort Campbell with the unit, so I was transferred down to the 24<sup>th</sup> and back down in Lonbin and I became a Medivac pilot.

And how long did you fly that, the rest of the time in Vietnam?

**Paula Wright:** Right, yeah. And that was very serious because we were not allowed to be armed and we went, when there was wounded, we went in, and -

So on your crew, I guess you had another pilot with you, so there was two pilots?

**Paula Wright:** Yes sir, there was two pilots and then the crew chief and a gunner and a combat unit. Now in the Medivac unit you had the crew chief and then a medic. We all carried .38's

because a lot of people like on MASH, they said medics don't carry weapons. Well that's a little bit different because they do carry weapons because it is your responsibility to protect the injured. In fact, nurses and I'm gonna brag a little bit, but I shot expert. Of course I'd been shooting rifles since I was six years old with my dad. I taught my sons how to shoot. I'm not so good anymore. It's been a while since I've shot. Last time I went with my son, he bought me an AK37 and we went out and shot that. So it had been 20 something years since I fired. I have a .22. I take the kids out to the farm and we go shooting out there. But anyway, it was very interesting. I got sent back to Fort Carson, Colorado, from Vietnam, and I was a medivac pilot there, and we flew not only military but we also what they called military assistance, MAST, military assistance safety and traffic. This is before medivac companies, private companies came off and started doing that. So they had a bad accident, the DPS would, or highway police would call us and we'd go out and pick them up and fly out to the hospital.

And then eventually your time in the Army ended in 1975, is that what you had said earlier? Was that something that you wanted to get out or were you forced out, or was it bittersweet? Kind of tell us about that.

Paula Wright: Well, it came to a time where I went and had a few \_\_\_\_ in combat and everything, but once you're in combat and you go back to peace time Army or peace time serving, it gets boring. It was like a regular job. I mean when you're in combat you might be in battles, but I mean every day is, you might do a patrol every day, but every day is different, you get your situations. When I flew, every day was a different situation. Well, we're gonna go here today, and I mean of course I'm not trying to say I did as much. I have very, very high respect for these pilots that was in combat assault units because they really put their life on the line and everything it takes. I had gone into high zone Z a couple of times and everything like this, and it's what you have to do, you don't have to think about what can happen, you have to think about your job. If you think about what could happen, you ain't, you're not gonna function.

When did your rank revert back from warrant officer to E5?

**Paula Wright:** OK, that was in Colorado Springs, and they came up and they told me, they said you can be out or, they didn't discharge you, but, or you can stay in, but you'd be an E5, revert back to where you were before you became a warrant officer.

Yeah, that's pretty rough.

Paula Wright: And so I mean as far as everything like this, I did, and they put me in the helicopter unit and everything, and of course I had to check my hands in. That's one thing about the military. If McCollock's know just about as much on the systems as what the mechanics do. They may not know how to repair 'em, but I mean they do know the systems backwards and forwards, and so instead of like being a pilot engineer and everything, yeah, they know how to fly a 747 or some other aircraft or something like that, but they really don't know what causes it to operate. In fact when I got out of the military, I went ahead and got my civilian life and one of the acceptors came up and said every mechanic should be a pilot, but not every pilot should be a mechanic, and that's very true because not everybody is mechanically inclined. Leave the stuff alone. But anyway I went there and it was different because even though I was a squad leader, I'd just be an officer, and the first sergeant didn't treat me as well, he treated me nice, but you understand what I'm talking about. He'd talk to me instead of ma'am, it was Wright, you do this, and of course I realized that. I kind of know, but of course the paper would be different and everything. Thank God my ex, he was in the Army, so we both had the pay and everything like

that, and so anyway, then I got transferred to Germany, and they kept him in the States, so we were separated. So it came up and everything where I had the opportunity to get out and I got out. Now, I mean I wish, hindsight, 20 years, you know, today I could've retired and had a pension and I'm only 39 years old. It's a little bit different. I didn't retire until 2004.

Sure, that makes sense.

Paula Wright: It came up where we did have a crash in Vietnam and it wasn't my fault, and thank God, but anyway we had gone down and it hurt my back and so, and then of course the experiences I had. There were 12 people that I lost over there, so you know, and there was this one sergeant that I really liked, his name was Patton, and we were not boyfriend-girlfriend, but we were very good friends, and the leader's stay-in caught on fire one morning and I was one of them that helped pull him out, and that's something you never forget. Like I hate to say this but I'm gonna say it, well, overdone hamburger. You look at it, and we're meat just like animals are, you know what I mean? And that may sound callous, but we come up and there's the said what are you gonna see and be? And we said well what's that? Well crash and burn. And then you're gonna be kind of a crispy critter. I mean you know – so I guess that was ghoulish talk to hide the fear you had.

Absolutely. Well ma'am I tell you, I really appreciate you letting us talk to you today. It's an honor and Commissioner Patterson –

Paula Wright: Thank you.

...and myself, but everybody here at the Land Office is very thankful for your service and that's what this program is all about, and I appreciate you taking the time to tell us a little bit about your time in the military.

**Paula Wright:** Well, like I mentioned in my email, I was at a reunion at the Vietnam Veterans Center here in Texas Tech, and they said why are you doing this? Well, I said I thought it was time to let, I said there have been women in every war that the United States has fought, and I thought it was time to, of course women veterans are more prevalent now since Desert Storm 1 and 2, but I mean, like you said, you interviewed WASPs on here -

Yes, I've interviewed a couple of ladies that were in WASP.

**Paula Wright:** Did you know they did not get any veterans, they were not eligible for veterans benefits?

Mm-hmm.

Paula Wright: And that's wrong.

That's right.

**Paula Wright:** Because you know what, they put their lives on the line just, you know, and I was talking to one lady here at the grocery store and I mentioned I'd been in Vietnam and she says you're kidding me, you're the first woman I've talked to. She said I knew ya'll served, and I said yeah, there was 200,000 of us that served at one time or another. Of course a lot of them are like two or three tours, especially if you were career. Just like the guys are doing now over in

Iraq and Afghanistan. But anyway, I'm still very active, I am a board member of a GLBT veterans organization, and we have of course mostly women. We have a few men and women. So I'm not going to get into the political don't ask don't tell or anything like that, but I mean, and I'm not gonna say what my sexual orientation is, it's nobody else's business. But I look at it this way, we all served. We all put our lives at risk. We might not have served in combat, but we could have at any time, we could've got the call where we got on an aircraft and go into harm's way, and we earned our benefits, we served proudly.

Very much so.

Paula Wright: Excuse my language, it's a bunch of crap.

We're proud of your service and we want to thank you for that.

**Paula Wright:** You're gonna have to edit, I don't know if you turned the recorder off. You gonna turn that last part off.

That's OK. I've heard worse. Don't worry about that. So I think it was a good interview ma'am, and like I said before we started, we'll make copies of this soon that we'll send to you and then also if you have any photographs or anything that you'd want us to put on the web site at some point, what we'll do is get the interview transcribed and if you have any pictures you want put on there we can put those on, too.

**Paula Wright:** I wish I did but in 1995, my house caught on fire and all my pictures burned up.

Oh, I'm sorry about that, yes ma'am, understood. Well at least you'll have this as a memento that you can pass on.

**Paula Wright:** I told my kids, I told you and I've told the Vietnam Vet Center, so I mean it's down in history. It's not gonna be lost.

Yes ma'am. Well I thank you very much, ma'am, and we'll be in touch soon.

Paula Wright: OK, thank you very much. You have a nice weekend.

You too, take care. Bye.

[End of recording]